

UK basketball notebook: In college sports, the line between gamesmanship, cheating is blurry

The NCAA punished the women's rowing program at the University of California San Diego for rules violations. The women's rowing team.

The coaches knowingly allowed ineligible athletes to participate in competition by using the names of eligible athletes, the NCAA said.

Which brings us to Clark Haptonstall, who teaches a class in sports ethics at Rice. Sports ethics. That sounds like an oxymoron.

"I hear that all the time when I tell people I teach sports ethics," Haptonstall said in a telephone conversation.

Here is an edited version of the conversation and follow-up exchange of email messages.

Question: Is it "cheating" or simply "getting an edge" in competition? How possible is it to prevent highly competitive people from, shall we say, bending the rules?

Answer: "There is a difference between cheating and gamesmanship. Cheating is breaking the rules while gamesmanship is bending the rules. I believe that most highly competitive athletes simply want a level playing field. Often these athletes will cheat because they feel that 'everyone else is cheating, therefore I have to cheat just so that things are fair.' That is the way they justify breaking the rules. This includes doping, recruiting, voluntary practices, and many more areas."

Q: What do you think of the rationale that escaping poverty is an ethical reason for cheating?

A: "It is easier to understand why a person who is trying to escape poverty would engage in doping because they are able to justify it to themselves by saying that they are trying to build a better life for their family and community. However, this is not a victimless issue because someone with more talent or work ethic will still lose their roster spot to this athlete who is doping. What is hardest for me to relate to is why Alex Rodriguez, who signed the two largest contracts in MLB history, would feel the need to dope."

Q: What does it say that the NCAA penalized the UC San Diego women's rowing team for rules violations? If the women's rowing team is cheating, who isn't?

A: "The rowing case shows how much power coaches have over their athletes. In my opinion, there is nothing that most college athletes care about more than playing time. Because the coach controls playing time, many athletes will do whatever the coach says in order to make them happy. That is an ethical dilemma that athletes face. They have to choose what is more valuable to them: playing time or playing by the rules. From a distance it looks like the rowers were put in a very difficult position because, in a perfect world, you would hope that the coach would lead by example and serve as a positive role model."

Q. Generally speaking, how much do college coaches care about fair play versus winning?

A: "I think most college coaches would welcome the idea of universal fair play, but the general sense is that this concept doesn't exist at the college level. While all coaches would prefer to win fair-and-square, I think many would accept winning by bending the rules versus losing ethically."

Source: <http://www.kentucky.com/2013/08/10/2760220/uk-notebook-in-college-sports.html>